

The coming of spring means warmer weather and greener surroundings throughout South Dakota, but we also know that for many, it also means worry and concern about flooding. This cycle of flooding has been all too familiar in many communities in South Dakota for most of the past decade. The economic costs of this flooding are steep, as is the toll on our families and their livelihoods.

That's why I recently organized a series of eight community meetings to provide South Dakotans an opportunity to share ideas about how we can best work together to minimize the impact of flooding on our homes, businesses, land and roads. I have hosted meetings in Aberdeen, Britton, Waubay, Westport, Sisseton, Milbank, Huron and Centerville, hearing from community officials, agricultural producers, and business men and women. The seriousness of the issues raised – and the significant potential for affecting South Dakota's quality of life and rural economy – make it clear that we need not only immediate help in the short-term, but a better plan for long-term flood mitigation.

It's clear that agricultural producers have been some of the hardest hit by flooding. Many suffered losses a year ago and are again watching as their fields are covered by water. As part of the Federal Crop Insurance Program updated in the 2008 Farm Bill, prevented planting payments play an integral part in the farm safety net. However, I heard concerns from many agricultural producers that the Risk Management Agency (RMA) is changing its interpretation of the policies regarding prevented planting payments. Crop insurance agents have been telling producers that, although they have insured the land for the last several years and the land would be planted in a non-flood year, they may not see prevented planting payments this year. Recovering the lost revenue from crops that would have been planted is a central reason that producers buy crop insurance coverage in the first place. It's important that our producers who are unable to plant due to seasonal flooding will continue to benefit from prevented planting payments.

Inaccessible roads are another key concern. Countless county and township roads have been underwater, and several key highways have been closed for periods of time – making it difficult to travel the region and for emergency vehicles to reach their destinations. Funding from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Transportation to repair flooded and damaged roads remains a top concern of state and local officials, as well as businesses and farmers. I'm pleased Governor Rounds recently announced that the state will use emergency funds for road repairs. However, when it comes to federal assistance for highway repairs, the Federal government is often not quick enough to reimburse states with the federal share. I will continue to work with federal officials to speed up the backlog of payments to states such as South Dakota.

I believe we can do more to ensure that existing flood recovery and mitigation programs work better for communities, counties, and tribes in South Dakota. One key concern that arose time and again is the unrealistic requirement of a local 25 percent match of federal funding. These rules place a significant burden on small rural communities who are already struggling in challenging economic times. I am committed to working with these communities and others to ensure South Dakota communities, tribes and counties have the ability to recover from and protect themselves from the severe economic challenges that flooding presents.

I have begun following up with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Risk Management Association and the Department of Transportation to request their assistance in managing the immediate concerns I've heard from local officials, farmers and other individuals. In addition, I will continue working with state, federal and local agencies to develop comprehensive mitigation plans that work to improve our long-term ability to manage flooding. And as we know, this isn't just a problem in the spring. Flooding can be as bad or worse in the fall. To be certain, South Dakotans have banded together, as they always do, to deal with the worst of the flooding dangers and the smaller inconveniences. I encourage all South Dakotans affected by flooding to contact me or my offices about ways we can continue to work together to limit the impact of future flooding on our livelihoods and local communities.